

VINCENT VAN GOGH

CONCEPT

Texture is unique among the art elements in that it is vicariously experienced through the eyes but is directly known through the sense of touch. In *Undergrowth with Two Figures*, van Gogh has appealed to both our wandering eyes and the curiosity of touch. In this work, we are immediately drawn to the rich, thick, slashy application of paint that delightfully captures the lush undergrowth. We are drawn not only to the visual texture of the environment, but to the tactile surface of the copious, layered dashes of paint. Don't you wonder what that must feel like? Inspired by *Undergrowth with Two Figures*, students will create a painting applying both implied and actual texture.



detail: Vincent van Gogh, *Undergrowth with Two Figures*, 1890, Bequest of Mary E. Johnston. 1967.1430

BACKGROUND

Vincent van Gogh's work, all produced during a period of only ten years, hauntingly conveys through its striking color, coarse brushwork, and contoured forms, the anguish of a mental illness that eventually resulted in his suicide. His 1600 drawings and 750 paintings constitute a remarkably insightful record of his life.

Van Gogh was born in Holland on March 30, 1853. His father was the village pastor and maintained strict, religious principles at home. Van Gogh grew up with deep empathy for other's troubles and plights. He first sought a career as a minister, and his duties consisted of preaching to coal miners and their families. He sympathized with their dreadful working conditions, chronicling their harsh lives through a series of drawings. Because van Gogh's altruistic desire reached fanatical proportions, the church dismissed

him, which led to his final career as an artist.

In the autumn of 1880, after more than a year of nomadically wandering the countryside while drawing the landscape and the poor villagers, van Gogh entered the Ecole des Beaux-Art in Brussels with the encouragement and financial support of his brother, Theo, an art dealer in Paris. Years of working hard, refining his technique, and learning to work in new media served as stepping stones toward the production of what is considered van Gogh's first great masterpiece, *The Potato Eaters*, of 1885. His experiences as a preacher are reflected in this dark and somber painting of five peasants under pale lamplight eating their evening meal. Van Gogh's intense desire to express the misery of humanity he witnessed first-hand is evident in this work.

CRITICAL THINKING

If van Gogh had used warmer colors such as reds, oranges, and yellows, would this change the feel of this painting?

How does the title relate or describe this scene?

If you were to give this painting a title, what would the name be?

If this were a scene from a movie, what would precede it and what would follow it?



VOCABULARY

texture

Actual texture

Implied texture

brushstroke

impasto

In 1886 van Gogh went to live with his brother in Paris. While there, he experienced the new movements developing in art at this time. Van Gogh was influenced by the work of the Impressionists; his palette began to move away from the darker, traditional colors of his Dutch homeland as he incorporated more vibrant, lighter, pure hues. He also became interested in Japanese art and began to purchase Asian printed silk fabric that he often used as backgrounds for his portraits. In 1888 van Gogh left Paris for southern France, searching for sun and a place to establish an artist commune. Passionate about establishing the Studio of the South, van Gogh pleaded with his friend Paul Gauguin, to share his house and assist with the studio. Gauguin arrived in October of 1888. The two men soon began to quarrel and had violent arguments. As their friendship declined, van Gogh began to suffer from periods of depression culminating in mental collapse. During one such episode, in deep remorse, van Gogh cut off part of his ear. He entered a nearby asylum, remaining for a year, in the hopes of finding a cure. His only solace was the inner peace he found in painting.

In 1889, van Gogh moved to Auvers-sur-Oise to be closer to Theo. During the last six months of his life, he painted 150 canvases. In February of 1890, he sold his first and only painting during his lifetime. Throughout the next few months, he remained in good spirits and was remarkably productive, painting some of his best works, including *The Church of Auvres* and *Starry Night*. By contrast, *The Crows over a Wheatfield*, the last painting he created, has a much darker palette and more agitated brushstrokes than many of his other works. He painted this dark, broody picture of black crows

struggling in a stormy sky just days before his suicide.

Vincent Van Gogh, despite his troubled life, or perhaps because of it, created a highly individualized style of chromatic harmony that had never been seen before. He also invented the sinuous forms that became his hallmark, forms that symbolize his yearning to break free of artistic conventions. Van Gogh wrote, "...instead of trying to reproduce exactly what I see, I use color more arbitrarily so as to express myself more forcibly." The influence of Vincent's art has been far-reaching and profound. His dramatic use of color to convey emotion directly influenced artistic movements such as the Fauves and Expressionists, and the effects have rippled through much of twentieth-century art.

The Cincinnati Art Museum's *Undergrowth with Two Figures* is a dynamic example of the new confidence van Gogh had gained in the South of France. Painted one month before his death, the slashes of vibrant color and agitated brushstrokes are seemingly painted with a hurried and improvised yet assured hand. The color harmonies are cool in tone, perhaps an influence of the northern landscape tradition. In addition to the contrasts of complementary colors, he also combined vibrating blues and greens. Everything in this canvas seems to be moving and living, except for the two shadowy figures that appear to be rooted in their place. Notice that even the junglelike undergrowth possesses an overpowering feeling.

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

LANGUAGE ARTS

Write a story or a poem about *Undergrowth with Two Figures*. How would it feel to walk through these woods? Who would be walking with you? To where would you and your companion be traveling?

SOCIAL STUDIES

Van Gogh's last works were painted in Auvers-sur-Oise, France. Investigate the culture, history, and geography of the area. Discuss why you think van Gogh would have chosen this area as the setting for this paintings.

SCIENCE

Use *Undergrowth with Two Figures* as the introduction for a study on photosynthesis. Note the vegetation among the trees that indicate place, habitat, season, and temperature. Create nature prints to illustrate chlorophyll by using fern leaves transferred onto rice paper.

MATH

Use *Undergrowth with Two Figures* as the introduction for perspective drawing.

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Vincent Van Gogh, *Undergrowth with Two Figures*, 1890,
Bequest of Mary E. Johnston, 1967.143

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